

The aesthetic turn

This paper considers alternative styles of philosophy, based on art or science, through an investigation of Rudolf Carnap and Martin Heidegger. Carnap's criticism of Heidegger's account of *das Nichts* is analysed in relation to Immanuel Kant's theory of the imagination. Heidegger's account of the work of art demonstrates philosophies that take science as their model, over-emphasize cognition, and do not adequately consider the importance of apprehension.

IN 1946, PAUL TILlich PUBLISHED a seminal essay entitled 'The two types of philosophy of religion' in which he maintained that every philosophy of religion developed in the Christian tradition takes one of two forms. While Alfred North Whitehead once suggested that everyone is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian, Tillich argues that every philosophy of religion is either Augustinian or Thomistic – the former he labels the ontological type, the latter the cosmological type. The distinction between the two types of philosophy of religion is based on the differences between the two classical arguments for the existence of God; that is to say, the ontological and cosmological arguments.

While the details of Tillich's argument need not concern us here, it is instructive to note that the difference between the ontological and cosmological types roughly corresponds to the conventional distinction between continental and analytic philosophy respectively. Instead of recycling the tired distinction between Anglo-American and continental philosophy, it is more helpful to contrast two *styles* of philosophising: one that models itself on art and one that models itself on an interpretation of science. This way of posing the issue is deliberately provocative,

because it suggests that there is nothing outside or beyond style. Art and style, in turn, are inseparable – there is no art without style and no style without art. The distinction, I am suggesting, is not hard-and-fast. Just as there is a religious dimension to all culture, so there is an artistic dimension to all creative thinking; and just as religion is often most significant where it is least obvious, so style is often most influential where it remains unnoticed, and often denied. The choice, then, is not between style and non-style but between a style that represses its artistic and aesthetic aspects, and a style that explicitly expresses them. In order to explore the differences between these two alternatives, I begin by examining the debate between two philosophers whose work has played a crucial role in framing the debate for almost a century: Rudolf Carnap and Martin Heidegger.

In 1929, Heidegger and Carnap published brief texts that proved decisive for later twentieth-century philosophy. Carnap and his colleagues Hans Hahn and Otto Neurath issued a document that is widely acknowledged to be the manifesto of the Vienna Circle, entitled 'The scientific conception of the world: the Vienna Circle', and Heidegger delivered his inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg – 'What is metaphysics?' Both Carnap and Heidegger called for the overcoming of metaphysics, but their reasons and their intentions could not have been more different. For Carnap, the abstractions and complexities of speculative metaphysics were vacuous as well as socio-politically suspect. He insisted that clarity and simplicity are the necessary characteristics of truth. Philosophy can only enter the modern era by appropriating what he described as a scientific method of investigation and empirical procedures for verification. For Heidegger, by contrast, modern

science and technology, which are the culmination of what he labels the western 'ontotheological tradition', pose a threat to human life as well as the future of the planet. The only way to avert impending disaster is to develop a thoroughgoing critique of their pernicious effects by recovering philosophy's original relationship to art. Three years after Heidegger's lecture, Carnap responded in an article entitled 'The elimination of metaphysics through logical analysis of language'. The significance of these two essays far surpasses the initial exchange. Heidegger and Carnap present contrasting positions that have implicitly and explicitly shaped philosophical debate for decades.

Heidegger approaches his questioning of metaphysics from an unexpected direction by discussing the role of science in shaping the modern university: 'What happens to us, essentially, in the grounds of our existence, when science becomes our passion?' Far from a method of disinterested investigation capable of establishing objective truth, science, Heidegger maintains, is a product of the western metaphysical tradition that has been characterized by a pernicious 'forgetting of being'. He argues, 'Today only the technical organization of universities and faculties consolidates this burgeoning multiplicity of disciplines; practical establishment of goals by each discipline provides the only meaningful source of unity. Nonetheless, the rootedness of the sciences in their essential ground has atrophied' (Heidegger 1977: 96). For Heidegger, the 'essential ground' science forgets is being itself. Rather than disinterested, science's preoccupation with beings is an extension of Nietzsche's will to power in 'the will to mastery' through which 'man' (*sic*) seeks to 'secure to himself what is most properly his'. Within this scheme, the scientific attitude rests on two basic principles: representation and utilitarianism. When truth collapses into certainty with Descartes's turn to the subject, everything becomes a 'standing-reserve', or resource, programmed to serve human ends, and through his domination man finally seems to be at home in a world where everything is manageable. But at precisely this moment of apparent triumph, humankind's fortunes are reversed. Through an unexpected turn, the exercise of the will to power unleashes what Hegel, describing the reign of terror following the French Revolution, had called 'the fury of destruction', which ultimately destroys the world and with it humanity.

The most effective way to avoid the all-consuming abyss opened by modern science and technology,

Heidegger argues, is to turn towards a no less disturbing abyss that is buried deep in the ever-receding past. He devotes his entire philosophical enterprise to questioning what science forgets, ignores or even represses. He names this elusive remainder *das Nichts* (the) nothing. While science is preoccupied solely with 'beings and beyond that – nothing', Heidegger asks, 'What about this nothing?'

What precisely 'is' this nothing? This question obviously negates itself in its very formulation. One cannot say what nothing is without making it something. That is why Heidegger never asks the question directly; rather, he asks indirectly, 'How is it with nothing?' Nothing cannot be objectified, represented or manipulated; it is never given yet always gives whatever is and is not. Nothing is apprehended, which is not to say comprehended (I will return to this distinction in what follows), in moods like distraction, boredom and above all anxiety. While fear always has a specific object, anxiety reveals nothing 'in the slipping away of beings... We "hover" in anxiety. More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole' (Heidegger 1977: 103). This void in the midst of whatever appears to be present renders all beings uncanny and undercuts the very possibility of complete knowledge and reasonable control. Where science sees causes that ground determinate entities, Heidegger glimpses the groundless ground – *der Abgrund* – from which everything emerges and to which all returns through a process he labels 'nihilation'. From Heidegger's point of view, the entities that science investigates and technology manipulates are neither self-contained nor self-grounded; to the contrary, they emerge from nothing, which, while never present, is not absent. Nihilating nothing clears the space that allows differences to be articulated and identities to be established even if never secured. Truth, Heidegger maintains, does not involve the correspondence between word and thing, idea and object, representation and fact or signifier and signified; it is the primordial opening (*Aletheia*) between and among beings and entities that is the condition of the possibility of all forms of correspondence. As such, truth can be neither represented nor comprehended clearly and precisely, but is revealed in the elusive ambiguity of art.

Carnap confidently declares all such speculation meaningless nonsense. The goal of the Vienna Circle was 'to set philosophy upon the sure path to science.'

Logical positivism rests on two fundamental principles: 1) the strict adherence to the scientific method, which entails a rigorous empiricism; 2) the insistence that all problems can be solved by logical and linguistic analysis. Absolutely convinced of the validity of their method, Carnap and his colleagues go so far as to proclaim, 'The scientific world-conception knows *no unsolvable riddle*' (Carnap *et al.* 1996: 306–7). For science and philosophy to reach the lofty goal of total knowledge, they must free themselves from theology and metaphysics by dismantling traditional ways of thinking through a critical analysis of the language.

Though the details of analysis differ, variations of this philosophical approach share five important assumptions, several of the most important of which can be traced to medieval nominalist theology.

1. *Meaningful linguistic claims are cognitive.* This is not to imply that language is deployed in no other ways. It can, for example, be used to express intentions and feelings. Meaning, however, can only be determined by logical analysis and 'the reduction to the simplest statements about the empirically given.'
2. *Meaningful statements are referential, that is, they refer to actual entities, events or states of affairs.* A. J. Ayre points out that for logical positivists 'the meaning of a proposition is its method of verification. The assumption behind this slogan is that everything that could be said at all could be expressed in terms of elementary statements. All statements of a higher order, including the most abstract scientific hypotheses, were in the end nothing more than shorthand descriptions of observable facts'. This verification requires 'introspectible or sensory experiences' (Ayre 1959: 13, 17).
3. *Meaningful statements are representational. Words and statements re-present objective facts to the cognitive subject.*
4. *Scientific and philosophical analysis presupposes logical/linguistic and ontological atomism.* Statements are meaningful only insofar as 'they say what would be said by affirming certain elementary statements and denying certain others, that is, only insofar as they give a true or false picture of the ultimate "atomic" facts' (Ayre).

5. *Rigorous analysis reduces complexity to simplicity.* This method of analysis privileges simplicity over complexity; more precisely, critical analysis reduces complex phenomena to their simple parts. For Carnap and those who share his faith, the task of philosophy at the end of metaphysics is largely negative. The application of scientific method to philosophical analysis 'serves to eliminate meaningless words, meaningless pseudo-statements' (Carnap 1959: 77). Any extension beyond critical and regulative analysis cannot be justified in terms of logical positivism's foundational principles.

From this point of view, the claims of metaphysics and theology, he argues, are 'pseudo-statements' that are 'entirely meaningless'. Since the word 'God', for instance, refers to something beyond experience and is, therefore, 'deliberately divested of its reference to a physical being or to a spiritual being that is immanent in the physical', it is inescapably meaningless (Carnap 1959: 66). Most of the other important terms used by metaphysicians and theologians, for example, the Idea, the Absolute, the Unconditioned, the Infinite, essence, the I, and so forth, are similarly disqualified. To support his argument, Carnap turns to what he describes as the 'metaphysical school, which at present exerts the strongest influence in Germany', which he, he claims, is best exemplified by Heidegger's essay, 'What is metaphysics?'

Carnap concentrates his criticisms on two sentences: 'The Nothing nothings', and 'The nothing only exists because...'. In the first sentence, Heidegger makes two mistakes: first, he uses the word 'nothing' as a noun, when 'it is customary in ordinary language to use it in this form in order to construct a negative existential sentence'; and second, he makes up a meaningless word 'to nothing' (in the previous translation, 'to nihilate'). Far worse than attempting to extend the meaning through metaphorical use, Heidegger creates a new word that has no meaning. The second sentence, Carnap insists, is simply self-contradictory – to say that nothing exists – regardless of how this is understood – is nonsensical.

To understand the stakes of these arguments, it is important to recall that during the first decades of the twentieth century, Vienna was a hotbed of modernism: art (Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka and the Secessionists), music (Arnold Schoenberg), psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud), and architecture

(Otto Wagner, Camillo Sitte and Adolf Loss). Here as elsewhere in Europe, there were two conflicting strands of modernism, which bear a resemblance to the contrasting philosophical styles of Carnap and Heidegger. On the one hand, modern artists, and especially architects, appropriated modern science and technology to develop an aesthetic committed to rationality, clarity, transparency, utility and functionalism; on the other hand writers and artists, drawing on the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner, sought to fathom the irrational depths of human subjectivity in works that were deliberately obscure, polyvalent, and functionally useless. The most influential representative of the latter tendency is Klimt, whose paintings express Freud's eroticizing of the personality, and, by extension, culture. This rationalist trajectory leads to the purportedly styleless style of Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and their colleagues at the Bauhaus. Allergic to complexity and infatuated by simplicity, minimalist philosophers echo their architectural counterparts by quietly repeating the mantra 'less is more'. When considered in this context, the difference between scientific philosophy and art becomes fuzzy. The issue is not so much art versus non-art but two different aesthetics, which entail contrasting attitudes toward life. From logical positivism to analytic philosophy, the aestheticization of philosophy is affirmed in the very effort to deny it. The straight lines and right angles of black-and-white pages reflect and are reflected by the minimalism of facades stripped of ornamentation to expose straight lines and right angles made of glass and steel.

Philosophy, architecture, and art devoted to the principles of simplicity, purity, clarity and transparency, are distinctively modern and as such are outdated. In his influential work, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), Robert Venturi, who famously recast Mies van der Rohe's dictum 'less is more' as 'less is a bore', might well have been commenting on philosophy rather than architecture when he wrote,

Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture. I like elements which are hybrid rather than 'pure,' compromising rather than 'clean,' distorted rather than 'straightforward,' ambiguous rather than 'articulated,' perverse as well as impersonal, boring as

well as 'interesting' conventional rather than 'designed,' accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity.

For Venturi, style is *explicitly* substance and substance is style. Rejecting every variety of formalism and all minimalism designed to reduce complex wholes to ostensibly simple parts, Venturi proposes an aesthetic that cultivates the contradictions that transform the work of art into an endless process as well as a finished product. Rather than stripping away images to reveal foundational structures, Venturi proposes the endless proliferation of images of other images. The site of this shift is Las Vegas. The shift from modernism to postmodernism marks an aesthetic turn that repeats and extends an earlier aesthetic turn whose far-reaching implications have not yet been understood.

Throughout the history of western philosophy and theology, religion has been alternatively associated with cognition (thinking), volition (willing) and affection (feeling or affect). During the eighteenth century, many defenders and critics interpreted religious claims as primarily cognitive, that is to say, they viewed them as statements about the truth or falsity of the existence or non-existence of God, understood theistically or deistically, as well as about human existence and events in the world. To defend religious beliefs during a time when the modern scientific worldview was gaining influence, theologians and philosophers appropriated empirical criteria of meaning and verification to recast the traditional cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God. Starting from the evidence of the existence and design of the world apologists argued for God as its necessary cause. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, it had become clear that this strategy was ineffective because, as Hume demonstrated, the very empiricism used to defend belief actually undercut its foundation. If faith were to be rationally justified, some argued, its defence would have to be practical rather than theoretical. One of Kant's primary motivations in his critical philosophy was to develop a persuasive argument for religion within the limits of reason alone by recasting belief in terms of moral activity rather than scientific or quasi-scientific knowledge. But his analysis of the

relation between thinking and willing created more problems that it solved. Most important, the First and Second Critiques resulted in the unmediated oppositions between self and world, and subject and object, as well as the inner division between inclination and obligation. Kant recognized these problems and tried to solve them in the Third Critique, which explores aesthetic judgment. The central category in this work is 'inner teleology' or 'purposefulness without purpose', which is designed to move beyond the oppositional logic (i.e., either/or) of the first two Critiques, by proposing a dialectical logic (i.e., both/and). The issue upon which the argument turns is the relationship between means and ends. In contrast to the external relation between means and ends characteristic of utilitarianism and instrumentalization, Kant proposes a model in which means and ends are reciprocally related in such a way that neither can be apart from the other and each becomes itself in and through the other. Oppositional difference gives way to a complex structure of co-dependence and co-emergence. Kant gives two primary examples of purposelessness without purpose – one natural; the biological organism, the other cultural; the beautiful work of art. More precisely, the organism and the beautiful work of art have no external purpose, but are self-reflexive. Within this structure, parts are not isolated particulars; rather, they are co-dependent members of a relational network or all-encompassing web. While this idea has proven to be revolutionary, Kant's immediate successors thought he had failed to follow his argument to its logical conclusion, and, thus, ended up reintroducing the very oppositions he was attempting to overcome. After articulating a self-reflexive structure that transforms unmediated oppositions into dialectical interrelations, he qualifies his argument by insisting that the notion of inner teleology is merely a regulative idea that might or might not describe the world as such.

During the following decade, his followers took the step Kant could not take by arguing that the self-reflexive structure of inner teleology is not only heuristically useful but is also ontologically real. It is the foundational structure of both thought and being. Different writers appropriated Kant's idea for their own purposes: Hegel for his notion of spirit or the Absolute, Marx for his interpretation of capital, and, most important in this context, artists, writers and critics for the notion of 'art for art's sake', which became normative for modernism. It is customary to

understand post-Hegelian thought in terms of right-wing and left-wing Hegelians. However, there would have been no Hegel without Kant, and just as there are at least two Hegels, so there are two Kants, which can be described as structural and post-structural Kantians. The question around which this distinction revolves is whether or not the self-reflexive structure of inner teleology is complete and all-encompassing, or incomplete and irreducibly open. If it is complete, the interpretive task is to reduce superstructure to the foundational infrastructure, which can be economic, social, psychological, or linguistic; if it is incomplete, the creative challenge is to expose the inherent faults in every system or structure through alternative strategies of indirect communication.

Post-Kantian philosophy and art can be understood in terms of these two alternatives: structuralists include thinkers and writers as different as G. W. H. Hegel, Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clement Greenberg, Henry Thoreau and T. S. Eliot; post-structuralists include thinkers and writers as different as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Blanchot, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville. In order to explore the implications and possibilities of the inflection point which I have labelled the aesthetic turn, I will concentrate on Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers* (1799). I have chosen Schleiermacher because of the pivotal historical role he plays and also because his work is neither structuralist nor post-structuralist, but falls in between these two alternatives.

Schleiermacher was among the group of influential figures who gathered in Jena in the 1790s. While all of these philosophers and writers were transformed by the Third Critique, Schleiermacher was the only one who appropriated Kant's interpretation of the beautiful work of art to develop an interpretation of religion in terms of feeling or affection rather than thinking or acting. There is, of course a close relationship of these faculties. Thought and action presuppose but cannot grasp intuition, from which they emerge. Intuition apprehends the primal unity that thinking processes. The elusive origin of thought is prior to the differentiation between subject and object, or self and world, and, therefore, cannot be comprehended. Schleiermacher explains, 'You must know and listen to yourselves before your own consciousness. At least be able to reconstruct from your

consciousness your own state... . What you are to notice is the rise of your own consciousness and not to reflect upon something already there. Your thought can only embrace what is sundered. Wherefore as soon as you have made any given definite activity of your soul an object of communication or contemplation, you have already begun to separate.' Then he adds a very important qualification: 'It is impossible, therefore, to adduce any definite example, for, as soon as anything is an example, what I wish to indicate is already past. Only the faintest trace of the original unit could be shown.'

This remark makes it clear that the original unity from which everything emerges is never present, nor is it simply absent. It appears by disappearing, approaches by withdrawing, and, hence, is always already past, and yet, paradoxically, always yet to come. In other words, experience is always after that which makes it possible. In this context, 'after' must be understood in two ways, which imply a temporal ambiguity – after means both subsequent to, and in pursuit of. It should be clear that Schleiermacher's primal unity is indistinguishable from Heidegger's nothing, which is the condition of the possibility of every one and every thing. Just as Heidegger tries to represent the unrepresentable void from which (the) all emerges, so Schleiermacher tries to figure what is neither present nor absent, and, therefore, remains un-representable, through the imagination. He regards the imagination as 'the highest and most original faculty in man.' For Schleiermacher, as for Nietzsche, the world is a work of art, and the human imagination is nothing less than the concrete embodiment of the divine creative principle. Here, the work of art must be understood as both a verb and a noun – it is both a process and a product. Since human beings are agents of an encompassing creativity that acts through them, their works are 'single fragments of this wondrous work of art.'

Though never formulated in precisely this way, Schleiermacher's argument presupposes a distinction between comprehension and apprehension. 'Apprehension' is a very suggestive word with multiple meanings. It derives from the Latin *apprehendere*, which combines *ad*, meaning 'to', and *prehendere*, 'to seize.' 'To apprehend' means to take into custody, arrest; to grasp mentally; understand; as well as to anticipate with anxiety. 'Apprehension', which means a fearful or uneasy anticipation of the future; dread, implies an irreducible ambiguity that suggests

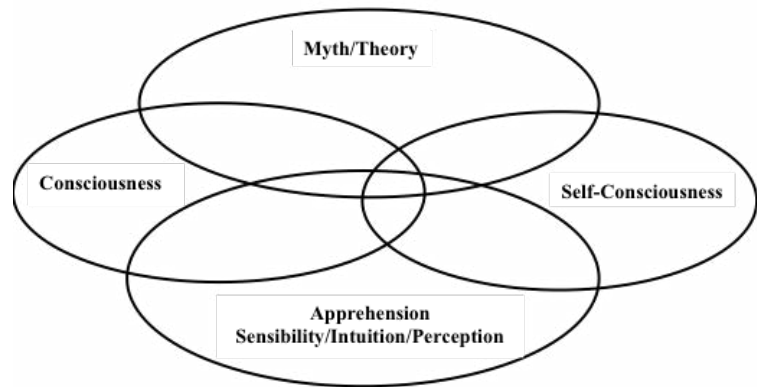


Fig. 1. The interplay of comprehension and apprehension both shapes and is shaped by so-called higher cognitive functions.

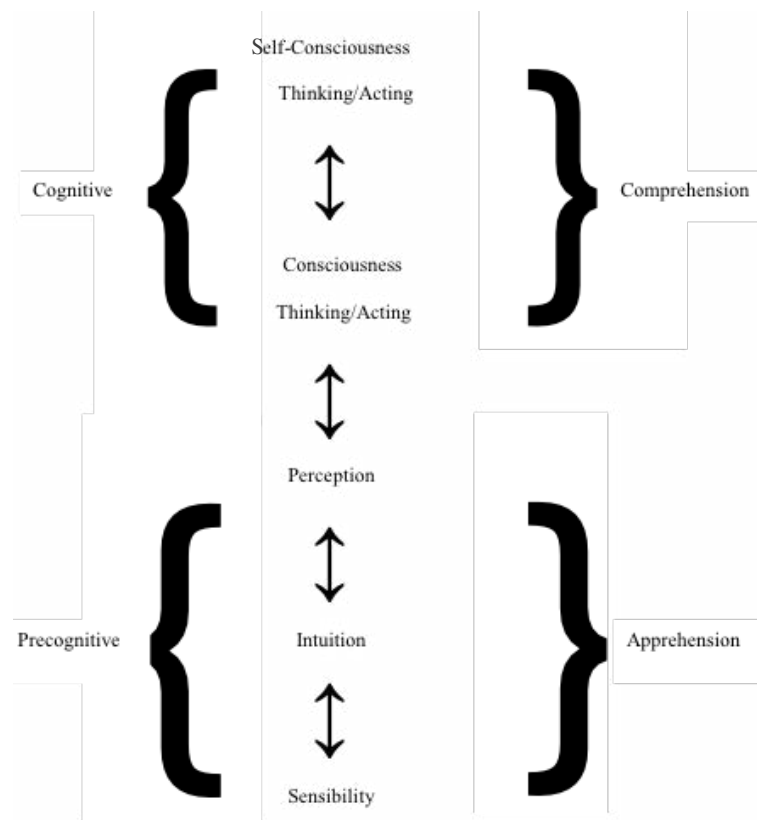


Fig. 2. Cognitive processes.

both activity and passivity. While to apprehend means to grasp, apprehension is the result of being grasped by something that cannot be comprehended or controlled. Far from mere opposites, apprehension and comprehension are co-dependent and co-emergent – each emerges in and through the other. Comprehension processes and programs apprehension, and apprehension disrupts and disturbs

comprehension. Apprehension and comprehension overlap, but neither can be reduced to the other.

The close relationship between comprehension and apprehension should not obscure the gap that remains between them. Affects can never be completely translated into concepts or words. This lingering gap is the reason there are things that can be apprehended that cannot be comprehended. While cognitive comprehension processes and programs apprehension, there is always an excess or surplus, and this remainder is what the work of art is all *about*.

When the work of art is not subservient to tradition or intended to provide meaning, reassurance, or security, it cultivates apprehension by figuring what cannot be represented. If it is effective because it is affective, art solicits a response to what cannot be mastered or controlled; this is what makes it so disturbing. Since the time of Kant, the unrepresentable has been figured in very different, and sometimes seemingly conflicting ways: Kierkegaard's infinite and qualitative difference, Freud's navel of the dream, Lacan's real, Blanchot's neuter, Georges Bataille's sacred, Derrida's *écriture*, Julia Kristeva's semiotic, Poe's South Pole, Melville's whale, Samuel Beckett's Unnamable, and Virginia Woolf's waves. What unites these otherwise very different writers is their contrasting efforts to expose readers to the apprehension of what cannot be clearly and precisely articulated in language. Each writer uses language against language to express what language cannot express. In this way, they all pursue what Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillip Lacoue-Labarthe aptly describe as 'the literary absolute.' In their seminal book of that title, they trace the origin of the literary absolute to post-Kantian romantics:

This is the reason romanticism implies something entirely new, the *production* of something entirely new. The romantics never really succeeded in naming this something: they speak of poetry, of the work, of the novel, or ... of romanticism. In the end, they decide to call it ... *literature*. ... The absolute of literature is not so much poetry ... as it is poiesy, according to an etymological appeal that the romantics do not fail to make. Poiesy or, in other words, production. ... Romantic poetry sets out to penetrate the essence of poiesy, in which the literary thing produces the truth of production in itself, and thus ... the truth of the produc-

tion of itself, of auto-poiesy. And if it is true ... that auto-production constitutes the ultimate instance and closure of the speculative absolute, then romantic thought involves not only the absolute of literature, but literature as the absolute. Romanticism is the inauguration of the *literary absolute*. (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1988: 11–12)

As I have suggested, during the 1790s major post-Kantian writers took an aesthetic turn whose implications have yet to be realized. Art began to displace religion as the expression of human spiritual striving. Among poets and writers, this turn led to stylistic experiments designed to push language to its limits in an effort to figure the unfigurable. Leading post-modern writers continue the struggle to articulate the literary absolute. There are, however, limits to this project and those limits have been reached.

Philosophy is dead. Having long modelled itself on the natural and social sciences, philosophy has been supplanted by fields of scientific investigation such as cognitive science and neuroscience. Rather than expanding into new areas, philosophy has contracted its focus to such an extent that it has virtually nothing to do with everyday life in contemporary network society. Far too many philosophers are caught in an echo chamber where they hear only themselves and their like-minded colleagues chattering away about trivial issues.

The way out of this self-reflexive loop is for philosophy to take an Aesthetic Turn. There is, however, no reason that this pursuit needs to be limited to literature, language, and words; it can be extended to other media and artistic practices. If the real is beyond words, then perhaps it can be approached, or, more precisely, perhaps it can approach, not only in words, but also in works of art.

For the past two decades, my wager, or one of my wagers, has been that the Aesthetic Turn opens new possibilities for the philosophical and what I have described as the *a/theological imagination*. In a series of books, I have sought to weave together words and images to expand the space of analysis and argument beyond straight lines, right angles, and black-and-white. When this stylistic gesture proved insufficient, I took philosophy off the page and started creating art. Rather than a break with the philosophical tradition, I regard these works of art as an alternative style of philosophical communication. In an age that reads

less and less, communication through images and figures that cannot be reduced to words might bring philosophy back to life. ■



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